THE TRINIDAD CARNIVAL: A MEDIUM OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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The Trinidad Carnival, "the greatest show on earth", as it is called by the people, is held annually during the prelenten season. The festival has undergone many changes since it was introduced by French planters at the end of the eighteenth century. With the participation of the Black population after emancipation in 1834, African traditions were adopted by the festivities. Over time the carnival's European and African customs have merged into a unique Trinidadian art form.

The three elements of carnival, the *mas,* i.e. the masquerade, the calypso, and the steelband are woven into a general network of festive activities which is subdivided into the pre-carnival events and the Monday and Tuesday carnival revelry beginning with the Sunday night Dimanche Gras Show. Several weeks before carnival culminates in the Tuesday parade, the great "bacchanal"[1] starts off with calypso concerts, steelband competitions and frantic activity in the mas camps where the costumes for the parade and the individual competitions are prepared. On Tuesday, huge bands parade through the streets of Port of Spain with members of up to 4,000 people. In the arena of the Queen's Park Savannah the bands are judged by official judges from the Carnival Development Committee (CDC) for "The Best Band Competition" and by the people for "The People's Choice" award.

Carnival, the "theater of the streets" is an ephemeral celebration. Every year the bandleaders design the costumes anew, make up new stories, musicians write new songs. Past carnivals live only in the memory of the people so that the festival is an art form that is not preserved in a museum but stored in the collective mind of the community. Derek Walcott has called it "a theater without walls, a museum of the moment", accordingly.[2]

The function and significance of the carnival immediately relates to the society's social and political environment. Broadly speaking, the carnival constitutes a means of communication where people want to bring certain

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[1] Bacchanal refers to the Roman Bacchanalia, a festival where homage was paid to Dionysus.

[2] Derek WALCOTT, "Theater Without Walls", *Kennedy Center: Stagebill,* November 1988, p. 39.

topics to everybody's attention. Carnival is bound to attack cultural problems of the reality which is not perceived as being congruent with present expectations. In fact, the greater the discrepancy between the real and the wanted world, the more disturbed the regular channels of communication must be and the higher the impact of the carnival can be.

In colonial Trinidad of the 1950s, the carnival was one of the vehicles to ease the tension as the government realized that it was more profitable to tolerate the festival than to prohibit it altogether. The social levelling that occurred during carnival effaced the ethnic and social barriers of the colonial society. For the short period of the event, the colonized people could feel "free", but only within the framework of the prefabricated festivities. The carnival's institutionalization through, for instance, the installment of an official carnival committee in 1959, was a final attempt to use the festival as a controlled stabilizer of the colonial system.

Some writers argue that the Trinidad Carnival has its roots in the fantastic world the slaves created at the occasion when they were granted a certain licence.[3] In order to survive the slaves "at night [...] played at being people, mimicking the rites of the upper world". V.S. Naipaul commented on the Trinidad Carnival saying that "the bands, the flags, and costumes have little to do with Lent, and much to do with slavery".[4]

After emancipation in 1834, the former slaves were allowed to take part in the street parade. They appeared as tarred imps, devils, and bats, and "every negro, male and female, wore a white flesh-coloured mask, their woolly hair carefully concealed by hadkerchiefs."[5] The hierarchical order of the colonial society was artificially lifted for the time of the festivities.

During the latter of the nineteenth century the colonial government made several unsuccesful attempts to supress the carnival. For this period as well as for the slaves' pre-emancipation festivities the idea of carnival as formulated by Bakhtin applies:

> The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure [...] everything resulting from socio-

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[3]Cf. Bridget BRERETON, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962,* London 1981, p. 48; see also Roger BASTIDE in *African Civilisations in the New World,* New York 1971.

[4]V.S. NAIPAUL, "Power to the Caribbean People", in *The Aftermath of Sovereignty,* ed. L. Lowenthal, New York 1973, p. 365, p. 364; Naipaul here refers to the secret societies the slaves had established.

[5]Quoted from Errol HILL, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre,* Austin 1972, the only comprehensive work on the Trinidad carnival, no further study has been done on the carnival after independence.

> hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people.[6]

Throughout the post-emancipation period the upside-down world of the festival was left as a mere signal of the dire need for changes. Yet, carnival remained a temporary liberation from the established order.[7] The upside-down world was interpreted by Brereton as serving "the function of an escape valve for the masses."[8] It is not the purpose of this paper to enter the ongoing dispute among scholars concerned with carnival studies who argue if the carnival serves as a safety valve for the established order or if it contains revolutionary elements. Brereton's view, however, shows one side of the coin. In fact, the Trinidad Carnival of the 19th century was also a means of social criticism and playful testing of a new identity by means of parody and mockery. Craton, in his book *Testing the Chains,* commented:

> when the emancipated slaves found their plight as miserable as in slavery days and their aspirations thwarted by their former owners, discontent mounted. In some colonies the unrest was somehow contained close to the surface only in the riotous catharsis of the annual Carnival or Junkanoo.[9]

A look at the nineteenth century mask[10] of the *negre jardin* discloses a complex concept of mimicry which is much more than just mere imitation. In its earliest form the mask was played by white planters disguising as *negre jardins.*[11] They blackened their faces and dressed up in working clothes usually worn by their slaves. The tradition was resumed in the post-emancipation carnival by ex- slaves in a midnight procession called *canboulay.* Singing and dancing, armed with sticks and carrying torches they passed through the streets of Port Spain. Hill has noticed that

> the torches were symbolic both of their past bondage and of their newly won freedom, which they proclaimed by vigorous participation in a festival that, according to Fraser, they had previously been excluded from.[12]

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[6]Mikhail BAKHTIN, *Problems of Dostoievsky's Poetics,* Minneapolis 1984, p. 122.

[7]Cf. Mikhail BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and his World,* Cambridge 1968.

[8]Bridget BRERETON, "The Trinidad Carnival 1870-1900", *Caribbean Studies* 11/12 (1975), p. 57.

[9]Michael CRATON, *Testing the Chains,* Ithaca 1982, p.325.

[10]The terms mask and costume are used interchangeably in this paper.

[11]I.e. field laborer.

[12]Errol HILL, op. cit., p. 24. Fraser was chief of police in Port of Spain; his report to the governor of 1881 is one of the best sources about the 19th century carnival.

The ex-slaves' version of the *negre jardin* developed into a fancy version with satin or velvet short pants and embroidered shirts trimmed with tiny metal belts. This mimicry, however, comprised two layers. First, the French masqueraders created the *negre jardin* by imitating their slaves. Second, the former slaves adopted and transformed the mask, thus creating a mask of a mask. It remains open to question whether the former slaves imitated the French's imitation of slavery, or if the *canboulay* version of the *negre jardin* was a parody on slavery itself. The emerging triangular relationship between master, slave and masquerader inherent in the carnival mask might have its basis in the transculturation process that took place in the Caribbean.[13] These creative processes consisted of several layers and had their basis "not on the simple two-way contact between European master and African servant", as Nettleford has phrased the matter.[14]

The French carnival tradition was first. It was a ballroom event and a festival for the high society. Alongside, a secondary fragmented tradition existed which was brought over by the enslaved Africans and found its way into, for example, the secret societies mentioned above. In a gradual process of creolization these two traditions underwent a metamorphosis that resulted in a New World carnival.

The concept of creating images of images is present in the carnival of today and it in fact refers to the very essence of the Trinidad festival. Carnival masks are facsimiles of reality which are stored in the memory of the people thus creating a continuing human experience of the people for the people.

The carnival began to lose its traditional masks, the devils, bats, and imps around the 1920s. Simultaneously, middle class participation in the carnival fostered more elaborate installments, namely the historical bands. They came into full swing in the 1950s, the time preceding Trinidad's political independence in 1962. Western cultural products, especially Hollywood movies, served as a background for many historical bands so that the concept of mimicry no longer applied by then. The traditional nineteenth century masks and the historical bands did not survive to play prominent parts in the carnival. Today, the remaining robbers or the sailor bands play but a sideshow compared with the dominant "pretty masks". A transformation toward a carnival of color and prettiness occurred during the 1970s and can be regarded as a result of Trinidad's 1962 independence.

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[13]Cf. Sidney MINTZ, *Caribbean Transformations*, Baltimore 1984.

[14]Rex NETTLEFORD, *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica*, Los Angeles 1979, p. 185.

The historical bands recalled themes from history based often on extensive research in libraries or of films. Yet the focus had shifted from mere mockery to the need of an expression of the self.

As a point in fact Harold Saldhena, one of the most distinguished bandleaders of the last decades, in 1955 produced "Imperial Rome", a band that is still in the memory of everybody who saw it, among them Michael Anthony:

> This great band, bringing vividly to life the story of the Imperial Roman epochs, carried more than a dozen sections, each one representing a facet of the life at the capitol and in high society during that colourful period. [...] Nero Caesar stood out most majestic in royal purple and silver, a laurel wreath of gold round his head, a cape 14 feet long, with gold sandals on his feet, and in his hand a golden harp, a wine glass, and a weeping glass.[15]

References to the Hollywood movie *Quo Vadis* were apparent, the details such as the weeping glass or the golden harp were modelled after Peter Ustinov's presentation of Nero. In the movie, however, Ustinov portrayed the emperor as a poor image of a Roman imperator. His presentation satirically displayed a sovereign whose concern lies not with the people but his own greed for power. The carnivalized Nero, on the other hand, turned out to be more than a mere imitation. The masquerader turned Nero upside-down, and again the concept of creating an image of an image becomes apparent: Nero according to Anthony was not playing Nero. He rather displayed the costume of Nero with him as person inside. The concern with being visible and recognizable in the costume proclaims the masqueraders sovereignty and self-esteem. This also explains the absence of face masks in the Trinidad carnival, a tradition very much alive in European carnivals. Headpieces are common though, but the masqueraders who perform in broad daylight, do not become the character they present. The idea behind the Nero presentation is not to play the role of Nero but to dance the costume. The authenticity of the rich costume,[16] and the care for details as, for example, the weeping glass, allude to the source of the mask. But the authenticity is broken when the masqueraders dance the costumes to calypso music on an open stage in the Savannah.

Furthermore, the transformation of the Hollywood satire into a carnival event displayed the "grandeur" and "power" of the emperor:

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[15]Trinidad *Guardian*, February 27, 1984.

[16]Artistic craftsmanship has a long tradition in the carnival. The historical bands' breastplates and shields, for example, were made of copper, a tradition that is still upheld today by bands such as Berlin Associates and Peter Minshall.

> What made Saldenha's "Nero" such an outstanding presentation was that it was portrayed by a man of such excellent physical proportions that one immediately felt the power and toughness that was Nero Caesar, against the grandeur that was Imperial Rome.[17]

A western understanding of irony as being "a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was [...] a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery"[18] does not apply to the carnival presentation. According to Frantz Fanon, irony has a different connotation in the Caribbean:

> in Europe irony protects against the awareness of anguish, in Martinique it protects against the awareness of Negritude. [...] It can be seen that a study of irony in the West Indies is crucial for the sociology of this region. Aggressiveness there is almost always cushioned by irony. See for example, the Carnival and the songs composed in this occasion.[19]

Two models are possible for an interpretation of the Nero mask: First seen from a western point of view, the mask's authority is a mockery of the colonial power, i.e., opposite to the expressed grandeur it displays that a Black man can play Nero, and thus might even be a reference to the political independence to come. Following Fanon's observations, however, the emphasis would be on Nero's mocking the colonial power and thereby covering up the colonized people's aggressiveness. Both models do not seem to fully cover the Caribbean experience, however, for Nero's ambivalent message can be interpreted from a two-way perspective. On the surface the mask passes as an imitation of the European past whereas on a deeper level, it can be read as a symbolic statement that the European predominance will soon pass into the hands of the Trinidadians. Eco, in his 1984 article *Frames of Comic Freedom* argues along the same lines:

> We are absolutely impermeable to nonwestern comedy, while we are able to understand eastern tragedies [...] We do not really understand the reason behind why or when Japanese or Chinese laugh unless we are endowed with some ethnographic information.[20]

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[17] Trinidad *Guardian*, Feb. 27, 1984.

[18] *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford 1971, p. 484.

[19] Frantz FANON, "West Indians and Africans", *The Aftermath of Sovereignty*, eds. Lowenthal and Comitas, New York 1983, p. 267.

[20] Umberto ECO, "The Frames of Comic Freedom", *Carnival!*, ed. T. Sebeok, New York 1985, p. 3.

By using the carnival as a medium, the masqueraders imitate a movie scene on one level in order to become equal to the colonizer. On another level the portrayal of a historical character enables them to participate in a communicative process not accessible in the colonial society. Lowenthal, however, comments negatively on this illusion:

> West Indians genuinely believe their identity can be altered. The wish is often realized in imagination; they easily persuade themselves they are something else [...] This delusion is most prevalent in the elite and middle class.[21]

To view the carnival as a direct outlet of this delusion would overstress Lowenthal's argument. Nevertheless, the festival is a creative outlet of the Trinidadians' imaginative concepts of their identity.

Historical metaphors in carnival bands up to Trinidad's independence, referred to Trinidad's colonial situation in a polemic way. Polemics, as it was trimmed with poetic allusions, made up the bandleaders' scholarly way of presentation. They appear to be the adequate expression of a people deprived of the right of self-determination because polemics are immediately dependent on an authority which they mean to dispute but which, in actuality, they remain bound to reassert.[22] Carnival reinterprets and comments on political realities, but is not a political action by itself. Carnival is neither, as Naipaul understands it, an aesthetic alternative to life, an illusion, or a direct reflection of reality. It appears to be rather a stylized rendering of concerns and values of the society.[23]

Trinidad's independence gradually had an impact on the carnival bands. The renaissance the carnival experienced in the pre-independence period of the 1950s was tied to the emergence of Creole nationalism. But when political unrest in connection with the black power movement brushed across Trinidad in the early 1970s, an awareness of things African became evident and the people became interested in their environment. Productions such as *Anancy Story* (1972) and *Wonders of Buccoo Reef* (1971) by Eric Williams recaptured Caribbean folk-tales about the tricky spider Anancy and local settings suchs as the Buccoo Reef on Tobago. In contrast to the rich costumes of the historical bands the gear became increasingly scanty. With the excitement of independence in full swing in the 1970s the so-called "pretty bands" became very popular. To this day short dresses and leotards are their traditional trademark and only

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[21]David LOWENTHAL, *West Indian Societies,* Oxford 1972, p. 250.

[22]Cf. Josef ERNST, *The structures of political communication in the United Kingdom, the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany: A Comparative Media Study of the Economist, Time, and Der Spiegel,* Frankfurt a.M. 1988.

[23]Cf. V.S. NAIPAUL, *The Middle Passage,* London 1962, pp. 90; "Power to the Caribbean People", op.cit., p. 364.

the king and queen costumes remained to be huge expensive constructions. Emphasis was put on color and a prize for the most colorful band was eventually given out some years ago. Minshall was one of the few bandleaders to work against this trend. In contrast to the skimpy nylon leotards he dresses his masqueraders in cotton costumes covering the whole body.

The carnival as a "festival of colors"[24] is viewed critically by many Trinidadians. Discussions about the message of the *mas* seem to be neverending and the population eventually divided into two parties. Those who want more meaning in *mas* mostly play with Minshall, who even dared to bring out bands in recent years that were all dressed in white like in *River* (1983) or black as in *Rat Race* (1986). Minshall's *Rat Race* was furthermore startling because he used rats dressed in black as characters. In fact, many people thought that this was an insult to a festival predominantly concerned with beauty and color. An editorial in the Trinidad *Guardian* of Feb. 9, 1986 expressed the irritation:

> Most, however, and quite understandibly would have rejected it outright as being by far too unpleasant a subject to portray in a national festival that places so much emphasis on colour and gaudy tinsel [...] He (Minshall) is unlikely to please the judges.

Subsequently, *Rat Race* scored fourth in the official competition, but the people voted it first place in "The People's Choice" award.

It is worthwhile to take a closer look at Minshall's productions. The king of the band, "Manrat", was a construction which deliberately evoked the masquerader's ability to dance the costume in the traditional way of shuffling and bouncing across the stage in the Savannah. He was a king of a new generation, consisting of an alumininum and fibre glass frame covered with black fur which was shown through with glowing red arteries. This modern image of the "Piedpieper of Hameln" was a transparent assemblage with satellite dishes for ears and spotlights for eyes. A radio was mounted in the costume's chest and a television set glared from his stomach, allowing for the audio-visual transmission of his appearance. Both were fed from a battery. On stage in complete darkness the radio provided "Manrat" with his own tune while the coverage of his performance was transmitted via the built-in TV set. Thus, self-sufficient

[24]The expressin goes back to a Kodak commercial in the 1950s, saying that carnival could not be recorded adequately in black and white. This statement has gone into the vocabulary of the *mas* and according to Minshall has become "the curse we carry on our shoulders. Then color for its own sake is utterly meaningless".

"Manrat" showed "Manrat" showing "Manrat". As Minshall commented that

> in the latter half of the twentieth century man with his own technology is strapped into a wheelchair where his spirit is encased, where he can hardly move.[25]

Here again, the concept of creating an image of an image appears in a highly stylized form.

Ever since Minshall began to design carnival costumes in the 1970s he has been a domineering force in the field. He attempts to stylize the movement of his masqueraders directly through the costumes. His wing constructions provide a good example.

The usage of wings in the carnival go back to the imps and bats of the dragon or devil bands of the nineteenth century. Minshall picked up on this in his first presentation *From the Land of the Humming Bird* in 1974. In 1982, Minshall's *Papillon* brought the wings to perfection. They were attached to a back brace to be strapped around the masquerader's shoulders and waist. The lightweight fibreglass frames were covered with organdy and taffeta. Contrary to the dominating carnival fashion of the time with its enormous costumes built like sculptures, Minshall's masqueraders could actually dance their costumes. Kings and queens from other bands had to put their costumes on wheels because the heavy weight of up to ninety pounds made the structures very difficult to move.[26] Minshall's costumes on the other hand, allowed the masquerader an uninhibited movement which in turn could be choreographed by the designer.

One of the criteria by which the King and Queen masks are judged is how good the masquerader "dances the costume". It is peculiar that no specific dance was developed in Trinidad in contrast to Rio de Janeiro where the Samba is prevalent. Traditional masks such as dragons or bats used to perform a characteristic dance, but today's bands no longer do. As one of the oldest art forms, dance is a vigorous and sensitive medium of entertainment. The rhythmic movement arising from emotion forms a community:

> Dance serves to knit individuals into a unity, a society. Rhythm not only makes the individual whole but also links individual dancers by a common emotion.[27]

The way Minshall designs his costumes he provides the masquerader with a framework for his movements. During the early 1980s he trav-

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[25] Peter MINSHALL, personal communication, Port of Spain, Trinidad, February 14, 1986.

[26] These costumes are called totem-poles.

[27] *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* vol. 7, Chicago 1972, p. 30.

elled on a new path in the design of carnival costumes. Minshall, who was described by Walcott as "the designer who brought Carnival into an unaccommodating authority of artistic vision",[28] introduced a mechanic costume in his 1983 production "River" of 1983.

In order to reflect on the relationship of man and technology he invented "Mancrab" the evil protagonist who stalked beneath a white canopy symbolizing the river which he polluted. Encased in a satellite-like creation of mechanics he was the true predecessor of "Manrat", Minshall's king of 1986. The mechanical collar of his claws could be manipulated by bicycle gears to simulate the motion of the crab's legs. Self-supporting, with battery-powered laser eyes he resembled a robot. Gone was the fluorescent dance of former Minshall kings like "The Devil Ray"; his modern masquerader had to convert dance movements into stalking steps. Indeed, "Mancrab" was scuffling and dragging forward.

If Minshall had returned to carnival its artisan qualities with the wing constructions of the 1970s, "Mancrab" represented a second stage, the "mechanical age". "Manrat" finally brought the carnival into the "technological age" of the twentieth century.

In conclusion, the openness of the carnival provides the festival with flexibility as well as adaptability. Today, the *mas* has become an organized mass spectacle which integrates a large part of the population. Bands of up to 4,000 masqueraders determine the parade and in fact, there are more masqueraders parading the streets of Port of Spain than spectators watching along the sidewalks. The traditional diversion between *mas* and spectators thus becomes neutralized as Bakhtin recognized:

> carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.[29]

So, the carnival constitutes a cultural medium where the people are consumers and producers at once. Together they create the carnival spectacle, a montage of different bands in the sense of what Eisenstein has called "the montage of attractions."[30] But masqueraders cannot be directed like actors, the montage can only be broadly planned by the bandleader whereas the specifics depend on the participants. In case of failure, the effects are lost forever and the whole event may fall through. This has happened to Minshall's queen in 1986 when during the competition her costumes got entangled with the cables of the wagon she was

[28]Derek WALCOTT, "Theater Without Walls", op.cit., p.40.
[29]Mikhail BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and his World*, op.cit., p. 7.
[30]Cf. Sergei EISENSTEIN, *Film Sense*, New York 1975.

dragging along so that she could not move offstage without help. Therefore, the "montage of attractions" remains unique in that the carnival is a show of trial and error. It is an art form which cannot be perfectly planned, stored and looked at again. Rather, it is meant to impress its ephemeral thematic effects onto the memory of the people. For the time of the festivities, past and present possibly collapse to provide new visions for the future.

Today's Trinidad Carnival therefore is betwixt and between; it thrives as a mediator between the cultural coordinates present in the Trinidadian society while it simultaneously incorporates changes in reality which go beyond the Trinidadian seashore, thus trascending reality itself.